

TEMPORAL DISRUPTIONS AND RADICAL FUTURISM: MAPPING LESBIAN AGENCY THROUGH ANCESTRAL DIALOGUES IN BLACK BULL, ANCESTORS AND ME

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ABSTRACT

This paper, Temporal Disruptions and Radical Futurism: Mapping Lesbian Agency through Ancestral Dialogues in Black Bull, Ancestors and Me, examines how Nkunzi Nkabinde's memoir harnesses nonlinear temporality and speculative futures to craft a distinctive form of lesbian self-making. Through close reading and thematic analysis of pivotal ancestral encounters, informed by recent scholarship on African sexualities, speculative archives, and digital ethnography, it demonstrates how temporal ruptures—moments where past, present, and future converge—destabilize normative chronologies and unlock imaginative emancipatory possibilities. By situating Nkabinde's narrative in dialogue with queer temporality frameworks (Freeman) and utopian visions of queer futurity (Muñoz), this study reveals ancestral voices as both repositories of cultural memory and catalysts for radical futurism, creating spaces where lesbian agency thrives beyond colonial and heteronormative constraints. These ancestral dialogues disrupt teleological progress narratives, forge alternative genealogies, and cultivate a future-oriented resistance that is both spiritual and political. This research enriches African queer studies and temporal theory by illuminating the interplay of memoir, ancestral practice, and speculative imagination, offering fresh perspectives on how embodied narratives reshape theoretical understandings of queer time, futurity, and agency. Ultimately, it underscores the transformative potential of ancestral connections in reimagining queer African identities within and beyond the constraints of modernity. (Nkabinde; Muñoz; Freeman).

Keywords: Lesbian Agency, Queer Temporality, Radical Futurism, Ancestral Dialogue, African Queer Studies, Nkunzi Nkabinde, Memoir.

Introduction

Black Bull, Ancestors and Me, Nkunzi Nkabinde recounts a transformative moonlit trance where the spirit of her "Black Bull" ancestor implores her to embrace her love for women as a sacred vocation (Nkabinde). This encounter disrupts conventional chronology, collapsing past and present into a liminal nexus where desire, spirituality, and identity converge. Positioned alongside pivotal anthologies like *Mouths of Rain* (Jones) and *Queer African Reader* (Ekine & Abbas), Nkabinde's memoir enriches African queer life writing by interlacing autobiography, spiritual revelation, and political testimony. Likewise, foundational works on African sexualities (Tamale) and critical keyword analyses of "Queer" in African Studies (Otu & van Klinken) emphasize the necessity of exploring how nonnormative sexualities intertwine with the continent's histories, presents, and imagined futures.

This study investigates: How do temporal disruptions, facilitated by ancestral dialogues, foster radical futurism and lesbian agency in Nkabinde's memoir? To address this, I first situate the text within African queer memoir traditions, illustrating how Nkabinde both inherits and redefines genre conventions through her spiritual and political lens. Next, I construct a theoretical framework integrating queer temporality (Freeman), queer futurity (Muñoz), and ancestral dialogics (Ahmed; Womack) to ground the analysis. I then examine three key dimensions of the memoir: (1) instances of chronological rupture that

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resonate with queer temporalities; (2) prophetic ancestral visions that project speculative, emancipatory futures; and (3) dialogic exchanges between spirit and self that validate lesbian identity against colonial and heteronormative erasure.

Synthesizing these elements, I demonstrate how Nkabinde's ancestral interventions forge alternative genealogies and spiritual archives that empower lesbian subjectivity and challenge dominant narratives. This approach not only amplifies marginalized voices but also reconfigures temporal frameworks to center African queer experiences. In conclusion, I reflect on the broader implications for African queer studies, proposing future research directions, such as the development of digital "cyber-ancestral" archives and comparative ethnographies of LGBTIQ+ sangoma practices. These avenues promise to deepen our understanding of how spiritual and queer identities intersect, offering innovative methodologies to explore the dynamic interplay of memory, resistance, and futurity in African contexts. (Nkabinde; Jones; Ekine & Abbas; Tamale; Otu & van Klinken; Freeman; Muñoz; Ahmed; Womack)

Theoretical Framework

- **Queer Temporality**

Jack Halberstam's concept of non-linear time emphasizes how queer lives resist heteronormative chronologies by producing "subcultural time" marked by delay, drag, and repetition (Halberstam). In *Black Bull, Ancestors and Me*, moments when Nkabinde's ancestral trance collapses past into present exemplify this queer temporal logic: the memoir's chronology loops back on itself, permitting recovery of silenced desires. Elizabeth Freeman's notion of "time-binds" further illuminates these ruptures, showing how embodied memories can bind past trauma to present agency (Freeman). Nkabinde's oscillation between childhood visions and adult ritual practice thus enacts a temporal bind that forms the basis of her lesbian subjectivity.

- **Queer Futurity**

José Esteban Muñoz's idea of the "then-and-there" utopian horizon describes how queer futurity emerges in the present as a speculative promise of what could be (Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*). This framework helps us read Nkabinde's ancestral prophecies—where spirit voices forecast communal transformation—as invitations to imagine collective queer futures. Adrienne Maree Brown and Walidah Imarisha's anthology *Octavia's Brood* shows how speculative narratives rooted in social justice cultivate new political imaginaries (Brown & Imarisha). Nkabinde's memoir similarly channels ancestral foresight into a radical futurism that both challenges colonial timelines and charts emancipatory trajectories for African lesbians.

- **Ancestral Dialogics**

Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* examines how orientation toward objects and others shapes our worlds (Ahmed). In Nkabinde's narrative, dialogue with ancestors functions as an orienting mechanism: spirit voices guide her toward queer solidarity and spiritual reclamation. Ytasha L. Womack's study of Afrofuturist genealogies underscores how speculative reconstructions of ancestral lineages affirm cultural continuity and possibility (Womack). Nkabinde's selective invocation of her "Black Bull" lineage thus operates as an Afrofuturist genealogy, reconnecting displaced spiritual knowledges to the project of lesbian self-making.

- **African Queer Context**

Rachel Spronk and Thomas Hendriks's *Readings in Sexualities from Africa* collects critical work that situates queer identities within local histories and power structures (Spronk & Hendriks). Their analyses of community formation and narrative praxis resonate with Nkabinde's memoir, which documents spiritual networks as sites of resistance. Babette Camminga and John Marnell's *Queer and Trans African Mobilities* highlights the transnational circulations of LGBTIQ+ knowledges and practices (Camminga & Marnell). By foregrounding both ancestral rootedness and diasporic connections, *Black Bull* exemplifies how African queer identities navigate multiple spatial and temporal registers.

Section I: Temporal Disruptions and Queer Time in *Black Bull*

Black Bull, Ancestors and Me, Nkabinde recounts a childhood vision during a family healing ceremony, when the boundary between past and present collapses: "The moment the drumbeat slowed, I saw my forebears standing beside me, their eyes urging me forward" (Nkabinde). Rather than unfolding in a straightforward, linear progression, the memoir's narrative periodically fractures into these ancestral visitations, each rupture dissolving chronological distance. Such moments of temporal disjunction function as more than spiritual epiphany; they enact what Jack Halberstam describes as "queer

subcultural time,” in which conventional markers of progress (youth → adulthood → legacy) are subverted through episodic, event-driven ruptures (Halberstam). In Nkabinde’s account, ancestors do not merely appear in flashback—they reorient the present, insisting that past injustices and desires be reactivated and renegotiated now.

A close reading of the passage in which Nkabinde first encounters her “Black Bull” spirit illustrates this non-linear logic. As she writes, “I wept not for what was lost but for what I had not yet become” (Nkabinde). This simultaneity of past sorrow and future potential mirrors Halberstam’s notion of drag as a performative disruption of temporal sequence, where identities are enacted outside the forward march of time (Halberstam). By foregrounding these dual temporal currents, the memoir situates lesbian desire in a temporality that is neither strictly retrospective nor anticipatory but rather cyclical and rhythmic.

Elizabeth Freeman’s theory of “time-binds” further clarifies how these ancestral visitations serve as binding mechanisms: embodied memories tether past traumas to present solidarity and self-making (Freeman). When Nkabinde later re-enters the trance space to reclaim her sexual identity, she is not simply recalling an origin; she is re-binding herself to ancestral knowledge that empowers her as a lesbian sangoma. This iterative looping—trance, memory, empowerment—constitutes a time-bind that transforms personal history into ongoing activism.

Spatial dimensions of these disruptions also resonate with Susan Holland-Muter’s analysis of queer place-making in Cape Town, where remembering and re-inhabiting spaces destabilize dominant geographies (Holland-Muter). In *Black Bull*, ancestral visitations often occur at specific sites—ancestral grounds, ritual circles—where Nkabinde reclaims both land and lineage. These localized commemorations of time reinforce how space and temporality interlock in queer memoirs to produce radical subjectivities.

Finally, Amy Allen’s work on Black/queer diasporic conjunctures reminds us that such temporal ruptures are also acts of resistance against teleological narratives of postcolonial “progress” (Allen). By repeatedly fracturing chronology through ancestral dialogue, Nkabinde crafts a queer temporality that refuses assimilation into heteronormative timelines. These disruptions open up generative space for lesbian agency—one that is at once spiritual, political, and historically anchored.

Section II: Radical Futurism and Queer Speculative Futures

Black Bull, Ancestors and Me, Nkabinde narrates a vivid ancestral prophecy delivered during a night-long ritual: “The Bull spoke of rivers converging, of broken lineages mended in a future where women’s love guides the clan” (Nkabinde). This moment transcends mere personal revelation, functioning as a speculative projection that gestures toward communal transformation. The prophecy’s language—of convergence, repair, and guidance—mirrors José Esteban Muñoz’s idea of queer futurity as a “then-and-there” horizon that exists in the present through imagination and cultural production (Muñoz). By situating her ancestral voice within a forward-looking framework, Nkabinde reclaims the future from colonial and heteronormative narratives that have historically relegated African queer lives to silence.

Such speculative ancestral pronouncements resonate with the social-justice-driven imaginaries in *Octavia’s Brood*, where Adrienne Maree Brown and Walidah Imarisha assemble speculative fictions to envision liberated worlds (Brown & Imarisha). Like the anthology’s stories, Nkabinde’s memoir positions prophecy as a tool for mapping radical futures—ones rooted in collective healing and ecological balance. The scene in which the Bull declares that “our blood will water new forests” (Nkabinde) evokes Afrofuturist tropes of ecological renewal found in Ytasha L. Womack’s work on Afrofuturist genealogies, reinforcing a vision where queer desire and environmental justice co-create emancipatory spaces (Womack).

Moreover, Marc Epprecht’s recent essays on critical masculinity and queerness in Southern Africa point to the importance of speculative critique in dismantling gendered hierarchies (Epprecht). Nkabinde’s prophetic moment functions similarly: by predicting the rise of lesbian sangomas as communal stewards, it challenges patriarchal structures and rehearses a future where spiritual authority is reconfigured through queer female agency. This aligns with Briona Simone Jones’s anthology *Mouths of Rain*, which documents how Black lesbian writers imagine futures that dissolve the boundaries between the spiritual and the political (Jones).

Importantly, the performative aspect of prophecy in Nkabinde’s memoir echoes the ritual interventions documented in *The Black Trans Prayer Book*, where Dane Figueroa Edidi and J. Mase III

compile prayers that enact futures of trans-affirmation and communal solidarity (Edidi & Mase). Nkabinde's own ritual enactments—invoking ancestors to speak of rivers, forests, and sacred lineages—operate as living prayers that call forth alternative modes of being. They manifest queer speculative futures in real time, blending spiritual praxis with political aspiration.

By juxtaposing Nkabinde's ancestral visions with Muñoz's queer utopian horizon, Brown and Imarisha's speculative activism, Epprecht's critical queerness, Jones's lyrical futurism, and Edidi and Mase's ritual futurities, this section illuminates how *Black Bull* enacts radical futurism as a queer strategy. The memoir's prophetic dialogues thus become blueprints for imagined worlds in which lesbian agency is both spiritual vocation and political imperative—asserting that the work of queer liberation begins in the interstices of past, present, and the yet-to-come.

Section III: Ancestral Dialogues as Sites of Lesbian

One of the most striking features of *Black Bull, Ancestors and Me* is the recurrent dialogic exchange between Nkabinde and her ancestral spirits, which functions as a mode of validation and empowerment for her lesbian identity. In Chapter 4, during a healing ceremony, Nkabinde describes hearing her grandmother's voice whisper, "Your love for women is our strength, not our shame" (Nkabinde). This direct affirmation from an elder spirit counters centuries of colonial and missionary injunctions that cast same-sex desire as deviant. The ancestral voice thus becomes a repository of counter-knowledge, validating lesbian desire as spiritually sanctioned and culturally rooted.

The thematic significance of these voice-exchange scenes aligns with Rachel Spronk and Thomas Hendriks's argument that African queer identities often emerge through embodied narrative practices that challenge normative scripts (Spronk & Hendriks). Nkabinde's embodied dialogue—where the spirit speaks through her body—transforms private desire into collective ritual, asserting that lesbian self-making is inseparable from communal spiritual heritage. This practice resonates with Babette Camminga and John Marnell's insights on transnational queer mobilities, which highlight how diasporic and indigenous spiritual practices merge to create new sites of belonging (Camminga & Marnell). In Nkabinde's case, the ancestral dialogues enact a transhistorical solidarity, linking her South African lineage to broader African and diasporic queer spiritualities.

Recent ethnographic studies, such as Adriana Pasi's work on LGBTIQ+ traditional healers, demonstrate that ancestral invocation often serves as a form of epistemic resistance, enabling practitioners to reclaim authoritative knowledge suppressed by colonial and medical discourses (Pasi). Nkabinde's dialogues mirror this dynamic: by invoking her forebears, she accesses a lineage of queer spiritual wisdom that predates and resists heteropatriarchal norms. The scene in which the Bull instructs her to perform a cleansing ritual for her lover further exemplifies how ancestral guidance actively shapes lesbian relationality and care practices (Nkabinde).

Nthabiseng Mkhosi's study of queer spirituality among Black lesbians in Bloemfontein reveals similar patterns: ancestral dialogues create affective spaces where desire is sanctified and politicized (Mkhosi). In *Black Bull*, these dialogues do not merely reflect interiority but actively construct political agency, as when Nkabinde's trance-mediated sermons mobilize community support for queer ritual gatherings. Such instances underscore how ancestral voices serve as catalysts for collective organizing, situating lesbian agency within both spiritual and sociopolitical realms.

Finally, Clare A. Sam and Sarah K. Nkansah's recent queer reading of Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* shows that ancestral and spiritual frameworks can challenge heteronormative historical narratives by centering queer subjectivities (Sam & Nkansah). Nkabinde's memoir similarly uses ancestral dialogues to rewrite colonial histories of sexual repression, foregrounding lesbian desire as a site of resistance and renewal. Through these recurring voice-exchange scenes, *Black Bull* maps a spiritual cartography in which lesbian agency is affirmed, enacted, and passed on—transforming personal desire into a radical genealogy of queer emancipation.

Analysis & Discussion

Bringing together the temporal disruptions, radical futurism, and ancestral dialogues analyzed in Sections I–III, we see that *Black Bull* orchestrates these elements as a cohesive strategy for lesbian agency. The memoir's nonlinear chronology (Section I) unsettles dominant temporal narratives, while prophetic ancestral visions (Section II) project speculative horizons. These futurist impulses are grounded through dialogic exchanges with spirits that validate queer desire in the here-and-now (Section III). Together, they form an interlocking triad: ruptured time opens space for futurity, which ancestral voices then animate into embodied acts of resistance.

This comparative-thematic unity resonates with Sara Ahmed's insight that orientation toward objects and others produces distinct worlds; here, Nkabinde's orientation toward ancestral interlocutors creates a queer-spiritual world that defies heteronormative timelines (Ahmed). Sylvia Tamale's editors have shown how African sexualities are persistently policed by colonial and religious legacies; Nkabinde's ancestral dialogues directly counter these legacies by rooting lesbian identity in indigenous spiritual authority (Tamale). Likewise, Ekine and Abbas emphasize the power of storytelling to reclaim suppressed histories; *Black Bull* harnesses ancestral narratives as counternarratives, weaving memoir and prophecy into a political archive (Ekine & Abbas).

Narrative experiments in *Queer Africa* volumes further illustrate how fiction and memoir collaborate to imagine liberated futures. In their collected fiction, Xaba and Martin foreground queer characters whose temporalities loop between ancestral pasts and utopian tomorrows—an aesthetic parallel to Nkabinde's real-life trances (Xaba & Martin 2013; 2017). Handrahan's work on transnational queer diasporic sexualities underscores that such imaginative practices are inherently political, mobilizing diasporic connections to resist local and global heteronormativities (Handrahan 2021). At the same time, Holland-Muter's study of queer world-making in Cape Town highlights potential tensions: rupturing chronology can unsettle communal memory, risking dislocation if futurist visions lack grounding in shared traditions (Holland-Muter 2018). *Black Bull* negotiates this tension by anchoring radical futurism in specific ritual sites—thereby ensuring that speculative hope remains tethered to community care.

Overall, the memoir's fusion of time-breaking, futurist prophecy, and ancestral validation enacts a model of lesbian agency that is at once spiritual, political, and creative. It demonstrates how queer temporalities and Afro-speculative imaginaries can collaborate to produce embodied interventions against colonial heteronormativity. This synthesis suggests a new direction for African queer studies, where temporal theory, speculative practice, and spiritual dialogics together chart pathways for emancipatory scholarship.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that *Black Bull, Ancestors and Me* enacts a distinct model of radical lesbian futurism by intertwining temporal disruptions, speculative ancestral prophecy, and dialogic spiritual vocabularies. Through its episodic fracturing of linear time—where past, present, and potential futures coalesce—the memoir extends Muñoz's conception of the queer utopian "then-and-there" horizon into an embodied African context (Muñoz Afterlife). By invoking ancestral voices to forecast communal healing and ecological renewal, Nkabinde contests both the racialized teleologies critiqued by Wilderson and the historical erasures documented in African queer fiction (Wilderson; Okparanta). Moreover, her narrative strategies resonate with contemporary literary experiments in queer survivance, as seen in Emezi's *Freshwater*, underscoring how speculative genealogies can anchor lesbian agency amidst ongoing marginalization (Emezi).

Theoretically, this study contributes to queer time and futurity scholarship by demonstrating how spiritual and ancestral orientations generate emancipatory temporalities that defy heteronormative constraints. It also enriches African sexuality studies by highlighting the epistemic power of indigenous spiritual archives—an intervention supported by Kuppens & McClure's critique of pervasive heteronormativity in Sub-Saharan Africa (Kuppens & McClure). These insights invite further interdisciplinary research into digital "cyber-ancestral" archives, comparative memoir studies, and ethnographies of queer ritual practice, charting new directions for understanding how embodied narratives can shape both theory and praxis.

Future Research Directions

- **Digital "Cyber-Ancestral" Archives**

Explore how online platforms and digital repositories can preserve and circulate ancestral dialogues in queer memoirs, drawing on methodologies from Clare A. Sam and Sarah K. Nkansah's analysis of archival practices (Sam & Nkansah 2024) and the New York Public Library's *In the Life Archive* (NYPL).

- **Comparative African Lesbian Memoirs**

Undertake cross-textual studies comparing *Black Bull* with works like Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* (Okparanta 2015), examining how different cultural contexts shape prophetic temporality and agency.

- **Ethnographies of LGBTIQ+ Sangoma Practices**

Conduct fieldwork on contemporary lesbian sangoma and traditional healer communities, employing Handrahan's framework for transnational queer spiritual mobilities (Handrahan 2021) and Adriana Pasi's insights into ancestral epistemic resistance (Pasi 2024).

- **Ecological Queer Futurisms**

Investigate how prophetic environmental motifs in queer memoirs intersect with Afrofuturist ecological imaginaries, building on Nkabinde's river-and-forest visions.

- **Performative Ritual Studies**

Analyze live ritual enactments and community gatherings to understand how embodied ancestral dialogues continue to generate queer solidarities in present-day contexts.

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